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ABSTRACT

Although about 15 percent of young children are cared for in a home day care setting, there is little information available on literacy experiences provided for children in home day care. This study examined literacy environments in home day care centers in St. Joseph County, Indiana. Sixty-one family day care providers responded to a mail survey regarding the types of literacy activities and materials provided to children in their care. The providers' experience in home day care ranged from less than 1 year to 12 years. Their educational level was higher than the typical home day care provider. The findings indicated that on a daily basis, 62 percent of providers had more than 30 books available for the children. Books were typically placed on bookshelves or in bookcases providing easy access. All the children had at least one writing tool available to them. Audiotapes were available for about 60 percent of the providers. Catalogues, magazines, and other printed materials were not as abundant as books. Forty-nine percent read to children more than once daily. About half the providers reported telling stories to the children at least daily. Slightly over half sing more than once daily. (Includes a review of literature related to quality literacy environments in preschools and day care centers, an examination of elements of quality home literacy environments, and a list of suggestions for home day care providers to enhance their literacy environment. (Contains 15 references.) (KB)

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A Focus on Literacy in Home Day Care

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A Focus on Literacy in Home Day Care Settings

Although curriculum at home day care sites has not been researched as vigorously as at other early childhood centers and preschools, current information from the U.S. Bureau of Statistics indicate that 15.4 % of children are currently being cared for in a home day care setting (The State of America's Children Yearbook, 1998). The research that has been conducted on home day care has primarily targeted safety, health, and general quality issues which include physical and environmental factors. Certainly these considerations are of utmost importance, but what is happening in terms of literacy experiences for children in home day care?

As noted in the *Joint Position Statement of NAEYC and the IRA on Literacy to Reading and Writing: Developmentally Appropriate Practice for Young Children* (1998), in homes and child care environments children face a variety of systems and resources in supporting literacy development. While some children have access to materials to promote reading and writing and see adult models of reading and writing, others do not. Some children receive formal instruction, and others receive a more informal form of support. Greenberg (1998) in an article describing the basic principles of teaching young children to read and write states, "Children need to grow up in high (or at least adequate) language and literacy environments, at home, in child care if that's where they are, and at school" (p. 72).

The present paper first addresses a review of literature related to quality literacy environments in preschools and centers, including the role of adults. The next section examines elements of quality literacy environments in the home. In the third part the focus narrows to survey results of literacy environments in home day care centers in St. Joseph County, Indiana. In this survey, family day care providers were asked about themselves, materials, and activities

provided at their sites. Based on these survey results, suggestions for caregivers in establishing a quality literacy environment are given in the final section.

The Literacy Environment in Preschools and Centers

Neuman and Roskos (1990) looked at how a specifically designed literacy environment could enhance literacy activities in play and found that such changes can be important for reading and writing behaviors to occur. Morrow and Rand (1991) found that the literacy environment greatly influences children's literacy. Furthermore, they found that the teacher's behavior was a critical factor in providing and modeling behaviors related to literacy. In looking at variables to predict outcomes of second through eighth graders, maternal education, educational outcomes, and the literacy environment of the home showed a correlation with vocabulary and word recognition (Snow, 1991). Language environments which are supportive of emergent literacy include children being read to, seeing others reading, having easy access to materials and being encouraged to ask questions during reading and writing experiences (Teale and Sulzby, 1989).

Roskos and Neuman (1993) in a study on adult-child interaction which positively affects the literacy value of play found that adults in care giving roles do use a variety of behaviors. The researchers label the first one as "onlooker," when the teacher watches the children at play and makes general comments to the children. The second is described as the "player" who plays with the children, models appropriate play including literacy related activities and the lastly, the "leader" who structures the play by conducting activities and arranging the environment to encourage literacy as the focal point with the teacher leading the play.

Adult intervention in literacy play involves a more complex set of behaviors than does reading a story. Adults model literacy behaviors serving a variety of roles, respond to

opportunities to develop literacy, and know when it is appropriate to intervene in play. "These efforts may need to consider developing adults' awareness and use of multiple roles in play, their understanding of emergent literacy within the larger framework of child development, and a recognition of their own personal beliefs about literacy in play (Roskos & Neuman, p. 93, 1993)."

In a study in an Icelandic preschool, where 75% of the population's children attend preschool research was conducted to determine if the response of the four-year-old children, the oldest members of the preschool would be positively affected by the introduction of literacy events in their classroom. It was found that "Icelandic preschool teachers should enrich the dramatic play areas with literacy props and integrate print into their curriculum. Presenting print in connection with dramatic play is not only a natural extension of children's preschool work, but also gives the oldest children an opportunity to work with challenging and stimulating activities p. 357."

Literacy Environments at Home

In Durkin's (1966) classic study of 200 early readers, she identified common characteristics of these children's literacy development. Parent interviews, as well as standardized tests, were used. Children were followed through sixth grade. Early readers continued to perform above average in reading throughout their school years. There were three overall characteristics shared by these early readers: (a) initially in their literary development children explored through drawing and writing; (b) children asked their parents several questions relating to sound-symbol relationships and spelling; and (c) families responded to questions about reading and writing and assisted their children in these tasks.

Another study by Hall , Moretz, and Statom (1976) investigated the home backgrounds of early writers. Findings indicated that children frequently saw their parents engaging in reading and writing activities. Writing tools were accessible to the children, reading materials were readily available, and children were read to frequently. Parents offered assistance in writing tasks at their child's request.

In a study by Anbar (1986) on early readers, parents spent a good deal of time helping their children learn letters through books and games encouraging them to read environmental print on walks, in store, or in magazines. Furthermore, parents encouraged children to write.

The ability to tell stories and describe related stories correlated with participating in conversations at home during meal times. Opportunities to discuss events at home produce the types of talk needed for the reading and writing at higher levels. (Snow, 1993). Watson (1989) found that parents use of alternate forms of words for definitions during a book-reading session with two-year-olds, predicts the children's formal definitions one year later.

The optimal home environment might be defined as an environment which is filled with print and includes a family that encourages and supports literary activities, with adults available to help with writing tasks upon the request of the child.

Given the amount of knowledge we have concerning the importance of home and school environments and their role in literacy development (Durkin, 1966; Hall et. Al, 1976; Roskos & Neuman, 1990; Roskos & Neuman, 1993), it is imperative that we stop to look at what is happening in home day care facilities in terms of providing quality literacy experiences for young children. Clearly this would lead early childhood educators and parents to understand how critical these home day care environments are to the development of children. Literacy programs such as

those designed to support emergent literacy experiences may be effective at reducing illiteracy especially with children at high-risk due to economic difficulties (Heath, 1983; Teale, 1986).

Literacy Environments in Home Day Care Sites in St. Joseph County

Survey Responds

In order to more clearly define the parameters of literacy opportunities in family day care homes, it is first necessary to deliniate what reading, writing, and language materials currently exist at a sample of sites. Activities which support the use of the materials are also a major consideration. Unique considerations of day care homes such as numbers of children, mixed ages, and wide variety of caregiver's educational experiences add an interesting difference to the sites. An understanding of these issues is a beginning point for a focused look at the area of literacy in day care homes.

All 140 licenced home day care providers in St. Joseph County, Indiana were sent a survey. Approximately three weeks later another survey was sent, with a reminder letter. A total of sixty-one people responded to the survey. Day care providers were asked in the survey about themselves, types of materials, and activities provided to children in their care related to literacy (See Appendix for complete survey). Sites in seventeen different zip codes, representing a wide variety of economic levels are included in the responses. Providers' experiences with home day care ranges from less than one year to twelve years. Twenty-one% of the respondents have less than five years of experience, 39% have five to six years of experience and 50% have more than six years of experience.

Education of the respondents ranges from 38% with a twelfth grade education to 21% who have 16 or more years of education. Considering educational requirements for a license in a

home day care are a high school education, respondents represent more of a college educated sample than the typical home day care provider in the county (Community Coordinated Child Care, 1998).

Full time children in their care ranges from two to 16 children with an average of 5-8 children. Clearly a home day care provider caring for 16 children is only able to provide minimal care. Sixteen children clearly exceeds guidelines for maintaining a quality program (Position Statement of tthe National Academy of Early Childhood Programs). Most home day care providers, also provide part time care for other children. Many of the part-time children are currently enrolled in area elementary schools.

Materials

Ninety-two% of the respondents own more than 30 books for use with the children. On a daily basis, 62% of providers report that more than 30 books are available for the children. The responses indicate that most providers have a good number of books and most are available daily in an easily accessible place. Books are typically placed on bookshelves or in bookcases providing easy access for the children. Library check out is closely related to zip code. Some areas do not have access to free public libraries. Some providers are reluctant to check out books because they might become damaged by the younger children. Although the survey would suggest that books are available to a certain extent, clearly home day care providers could benefit from information about how to provide books for multi-age settings.

All of the children have at least one writing tool available to them such as pens, pencils, markers, chalk, paintbrushes and crayons. Thirty-one percent of the children have at least 2 writing tools available, while 49% have 4 or more tools available. Typically these four have

included crayons, markers, paintbrushes, and pencils.

Audiotapes available range from 0-9 for 31%, 20-30 for 9.8% and 21.3 % have access to more than 30 tapes. Catalogues, magazines and other printed materials are not as abundant with 33% of the respondents having 0-9 available and 16% having 10-19. Perhaps the usefulness of having other materials available has not been introduced to home day care providers.

Activities

The described activities include reading to the children, telling them stories hearing children read pictures of words, doing finger plays and saying rhymes and writing for or with children, are the very basic components of literacy activities for young children and are addressed in the survey. The first question in the activities section is designed to see how often providers read to the children at their site. One respondent never reads to the ten children in her care, 10% read rarely or weekly to their 78 children. Although the percentages are not high, the number of children not being read to is worrisome at best. Clearly providers need information about the importance of reading many times during the day to children. Thirty-nine percent read to children once daily, and 49% read more than once daily to the children. At these 29 sites children are being read to often - a positive sign for literacy development.

When asked about telling stories to the children, 4.9% report never telling stories to the children, 1.6 rarely tell stories, 31.1% tell stories daily and the remaining 21.3% report telling stories more than once daily. In a very literal sense telling stories is an ongoing activity at many sites, yet perhaps not recognized as such. Telling the story of what a child found on a walk, or a report of what happened during snack are not considered as stories in a basic sense yet are powerful in the everyday story of life at a home day care. Providers perhaps did not recognize

these as stories.

Eight percent of home day care respondents report children never or rarely read to them. Perhaps they have never asked the children to read to them. Most report that 34.4% of children read pictures or stories weekly, 26% daily, and 31.1% more than once daily.

Ten percent never or rarely do finger plays or rhymes with children, 34.4% do finger plays or rhymes weekly, 32% daily and 23% more than once daily. Although over half of the providers have some idea of the importance of such an activity, it still leaves approximately 44% without finger plays or rhymes during their time in day care.

Six point five percent of providers did not answer or never or rarely write for children. 16.4% write weekly, and 26.2 write daily. Slightly over half (50.8%) report writing daily or more than once daily for children.

Thirty-seven point seven percent of the providers sing daily with the children and 50.8% sing more than once daily. Seven providers sing weekly, never, or rarely with the children. Additional information might be helpful to home day care providers who want to provide singing as a literacy experience for young children.

Summary

Most of the respondents indicate that more than 30 books are available to the children on a daily basis. Writing tools are somewhat limited, but all children have access to at least one. A variety of other printed materials are not as abundant. Activities related to reading to children are not quite as encouraging. These are children not being read to at all. Providers do not generally see themselves as storytellers even though their everyday lives are filled with stories and

remembrances of past days and events. Other literacy activities such as children reading to adults, engaging children in fingerplays and rhymes, and writing for children are activities to be encouraged. Slightly over half of the respondents sing more than once daily, but this still leaves providers who do not recognize the value of song in the everyday life of a child.

Suggestions for Home Day Care Providers

Providing additional support for home day care providers in response to their needs for providing literacy experiences for young children is vital. Information gleaned from the results form a springboard for discussing the current state of literacy in home day cares.

In conclusion, there are some easy, but critically important ways home day care providers can provide literacy related activities to children in their care.

- Keep books for younger children on lower shelves and older children on higher shelves. Provide baskets for books for the toddlers and infants. Rotate books often, just as you do toys. Keep at least three books per child available at all times.
- Use catalogs, magazines, "junk" mail, signs, print from the environment, charts of poems, songs, etc. to talk about letters, sounds and words as children become interested.
- Have a wide variety to materials and blank paper of different sizes available to the children on a daily basis. Even toddlers can enjoy the use of pens, pencils, markers, chalk, paintbrushes, and crayons under the supervision of an adult.
- Use audiotapes of music and stories to supplement and enrich your literacy activities. Preschoolers can use tape recorders successfully to listen to songs and stories throughout the day in a quiet corner of the room. At other times of the day music can be enjoyed by children interested in singing, dancing, and enjoying the rhythm and words.

- Read to the children throughout the day. Invite children to join you, but allow other activities for those not interested. Certainly, reading to children four or five times during a ten hour day would be reasonable. Younger children, toddlers, and infants will enjoy one-to-one interactions with pictures in books throughout the day.
- Use stories children tell you during play to recall at gathering times such as snack, lunch, or perhaps prior to nap time. Value the stories as interesting narratives about their lives in your day care. Transcribe stories for them or let them write the stories with the understanding that a three or four-year-old written story will most likely be comprised of scribbles, mock letters, letters, and perhaps a conventional word or two for older pre-schoolers.
- Have children read stories to you as they are interested. Value this time as an important part of their literacy experience.
- Use finger plays and rhymes during transitions, gathering times, and throughout the day. Use nursery rhymes as you go about your daily routine.
- Have children write to each other and to you, value the scribbles and letters with the accompanying verbal interpretation as you would conventional print.
- Enrich your play environment with literacy. Put books everywhere - in the house corner, building areas, rest areas, and any other popular places in your home. Have writing materials available for use in different areas to take pretend phone messages, write notes, make cards, and write for real purposes. Keep writing materials available to preschoolers in a special place where toddlers do not have access without an available adult.

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APPENDIX

ABOUT YOU

Name of Provider:_____
Address:_____
Phone Number:_____
Years of Schooling:_____
How long have you been a home day care provider:_____

ABOUT THE CHILDREN

How many children are in your care?_____**part time**_____**full time**
What are their ages?_____**part time**_____**full time**

MATERIALS

1. Approximately how many books for children do you own?
   0-9_____, 10-19_____, 20-30_____, more than 30_____

2. Approximately how many books do you check out of the library for the children each month?
   0-9_____, 10-19_____, 20-30_____, more than 30_____

3. On a daily basis, how many books are available to the children?
   0-9_____, 10-19_____, 20-30_____, more than 30_____

4. Where do you keep the books?
   In a basket/box_____, on a bookshelf_____, bookcase_____, closet_____, other_____

5. Please circle the writing materials children have available to them:
   none, pens, pencils markers, chalk, paintbrushes, crayons, other
   _____

6. Please circle the paper you have available for the children to use.
   none, scrap paper, notepads, plain newsprint or paper, lined paper, construction paper, wall paper samples, other_____

7. How many audiotapes of stories or music do you have for children?
   0-9_____, 10-19_____, 20-30_____, more than 30_____

8. How many catalogues/magazines or other printed materials do you have available for the children?
   0-9_____, 10-19_____, 20-30_____, more than 30_____

9. How many videotapes of books or stories from books do you own?
   0-9_____, 10-19_____, 20-30_____, more than 30_____

ACTIVITIES

1. How often do you read to the children?
   never_____, rarely_____, weekly_____, once daily_____, more than once daily_____

2. How often do you tell stories to the children?
   never_____, rarely_____, weekly_____, once daily_____, more than once daily_____

3. How often do the children read (reading pictures counts too) stories to you?
   never_____, rarely_____, weekly_____, once daily_____, more than once daily_____

4. How often do you do fingerplays or rhymes with the children?
   never_____, rarely_____, weekly_____, once daily_____, more than once daily_____

5. How often do you write for the children?
   never_____, rarely_____, weekly_____, once daily_____, more than once daily_____

6. How often do you sing with the children?
   never_____, rarely_____, weekly_____, once daily_____, more than once daily_____

COMMENTS

Can you think of any other literacy activities you do with children?

Would you like information on literacy development/activities for young children?